

This commemorative broadside is dedicated to the memory of Benjamin Thomas who was lynched at the corner King and Fairfax streets, just opposite Market Square, on Aug. 8, 1899.

His torture and murder at 16 years old was one of the thousands of racially motivated lynchings that occurred in the United States. There were 100 documented lynchings in the Commonwealth between 1882 and 1968, 11 of them in Northern Virginia. Benjamin Thomas, an Alexandria native, lived in this city with his family and was baptized at the historic Shiloh Baptist Church. He deserved much more from his community. Denied the

right to a fair trial and protection, his death is a sad counterpoint to the freedom his family gained only 30 years before. Over the last several years, the mayor and the city council have renewed Alexandria's commitment to racial equity and social justice. A new initiative launched in September 2019, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project, is inspired by the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) National Memorial

for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The memorial includes more than 800 steel monuments, or pillars, one for each county in the United States where a lynching took place, with the names of the lynching victims engraved on the pillars. The goal of the Community Remembrance Project is to bring Alexandria's pillar to the city, displaying it in a prominent location. The pillar has two names on it. The first is Joseph McCoy, who was

killed on April 23, 1897. The second is Benjamin Thomas. Last year, more than 300 Alexandria residents pledged their commitment to social and restorative justice in the city, and many joined one of the seven committees established for the Community Remembrance Project. These committees include: Public Outreach, Education & Programming, Marketing, Research, Marker and Soil Collection, Fundraising and Public Pilgrimage to EJI.

Since the September 2019 launch, the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project has hosted many social justice themed events. Kiara Boone, deputy director of community education at EJI, was the keynote speaker at the first Community Remembrance Project event. Other related social justice events have included lectures, a book signing, film screenings and a virtual remembrance for Joseph McCoy. The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project

is currently sponsoring a 30-day social justice challenge, which you can find at Alexandriava.gov/Historic. For more information about future programming, ways to participate, or how to donate to this community initiative, please visit the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project website: Alexandriava.gov/Historic. *The Office of Historic Alexandria thanks the Alexandria Times for their generous donation for this broadside.*



The 1899 view of King and N. Fairfax streets, then known as "Leadbeater's Corner."

Today, as in 1899, the southwest corner of Fairfax and King streets is a busy intersection opposite Market Square and in the shadow of City Hall. Around midnight on Aug. 8, 1899, a 16-year-old Black teenager named Benjamin Thomas was lynched at this site by a white terror mob comprised of Alexandria citizens. They attacked the city jail on N. St. Asaph Street, dragged Benjamin Thomas half a mile before hanging him from a lamppost in the heart of today's Old Town Alexandria. The day before, Monday, Aug. 7, 1899, the Alexandria police arrested Benjamin Thomas on the charge of attempted criminal assault on an 8-year-old white

girl. He denied the allegations. In the lynching's aftermath, the community generally acknowledged that he was not guilty of these charges. After his arrest on Monday, Benjamin Thomas was detained at the Alexandria Police Station House at 126 N. Fairfax St., on the east side of City Hall by Market Square. Alexandria's Black community soon became aware of the arrest and the nature of the accusations against Thomas. Just two years earlier, a white mob pulled another young African American teenager named Joseph McCoy from the same station house and lynched him. Hoping to prevent a repeat of that crime, several groups of Black men organized themselves and offered their services to aid the police in defending Thomas. Their concerns were rejected by both the police and Alexandria Mayor George L. Simpson. Many of the Black men who sought to protect Benjamin Thomas were arrested. Their efforts, however, were enough to keep Thomas safe for the night. The names of the men arrested, who risked their lives to protect Benjamin Thomas, are:

- James Alexander
- Robert Buckner
- Allen Carter
- Thomas Elzie
- Edward Gibson
- Albert Green
- John Haskins

- Alfred Mason
- Harry McDonald
- John Nelson
- Edward Payne
- James B. Turley
- Richard Washington
- William Washington
- John Wilson

The next morning, most of these men were heavily fined or were sentenced to serve time on the Alexandria chain gang. The mayor ordered Benjamin Thomas to be detained at the jail on St. Asaph Street. By the evening of Aug. 8, a white mob had gathered. Sometime between 11 p.m. and midnight, the mob, which numbered somewhere between 500 and 2,000, descended upon the jail and demanded that Benjamin Thomas be handed over to them. Witnesses remarked that the mob included many prominent white Alexandrians. Mayor Simpson made a plea for calm, while at the same time promising a swift trial and stating that if this did not happen, "I will give you my word, as a man of honor, that I will personally lead a mob tomorrow night to lynch Thomas." The mob was undeterred. They broke down the front door and surged into the jail. The Times described that "a great shout went up when Thomas was found and one hundred willing hands dragged him out and up the stairs" onto the street. Many white newspapers praised the

actions of the police in defending Benjamin Thomas. However, other reports suggested that not enough was done to prevent the mob from breaching the jail. John Craven, a white citizen, claimed that at least one officer was anxious to see that the lynching happened and that Police Chief Webster did not make an earnest effort to repel the mob. The hooting and jeering mob dragged the 16-year-old south down St. Asaph Street, his head bumping over the rough cobblestones. They pelted him with stones, bricks and pieces of iron. They stabbed him, kicked him and shot him. Wounded and bleeding, Thomas cried out for his mother. At the corner of King Street, the mob turned eastward, then stopped at the intersection of King and Fairfax streets, half a mile from the Alexandria jail. The mob quickly fashioned a noose and Benjamin Thomas was lynched from a lamppost outside Leadbeater's Apothecary. Although the city authorities were not able, or willing, to prevent the murder of Benjamin Thomas, they did react quickly to white citizens' concerns about a perceived threat of retaliation from the Black community the next day. Mayor Simpson issued orders limiting gatherings in the African American community. No similar restrictions were placed on Alexandria's white citizens, who were out in abundance in the vicinity of City Hall and the site of the lynching. White sight-

seers, revelers and even groups of young boys and girls gathered there. Benjamin Thomas's body was taken to Demaine's Funeral Home on King Street, where it was visited by hundreds. This did not include his mother Elizabeth who, according to the Evening Star "could not bear to look upon her boy." At 10 a.m. on Aug. 10, Benjamin Thomas was interred at Penny Hill Cemetery. On Aug. 28, a memorial service was held at Shiloh Baptist Church at West and Duke streets. Warring, of Shiloh Baptist Church, spoke of Benjamin Thomas as a moral, honest boy, who was innocent of the crime that led to his lynching. He asked, "Who can tell how this poor innocent boy felt as he crouched in the cellar at the jail and listened to the howling mob crying for his life's blood; when the rope was placed about his neck and into his mouth; when he was dragged mercilessly through the streets and bullets were being poured into his body by his heartless persecutors, as he cried in vain for his mother?" Reverend Warring advocated charging anyone guilty of the lynching with criminal assault, and he exhorted the congregation to boycott businesses of anyone who had been in the lynch mob: "Men stand behind counters selling you goods whose hands are stained with the blood of Ben Thomas. Don't spend another dollar with them." Mayor Simpson, however, failed to investigate any members of the white mob re-

sponsible for Benjamin Thomas's murder. More than a dozen Black men had been arrested for protecting him on the night of Aug. 8 but not a single white citizen was charged with his murder the next night. The Research Committee of the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project is honored and humbled to have had the opportunity to tell this story. This article is an abbreviated version of the committee's research. We invite you to read the full narrative and learn more about the lynching of Benjamin Thomas and Alexandria's history of racial injustice at Alexandriava.gov/Historic - Alexandria Community Remembrance Project



Today's view of the corner of King and N. Fairfax streets, where 16-year-old Benjamin Thomas was lynched on Aug. 8, 1899.